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## BACCALAUREATE SERMON

DELIVERED BY

WILLIAM PIERSON MERRILL

TO THE

GRADUATING CLASSES OF CORNELL UNIVERSITY

SUNDAY, JUNE 14, 1914

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## Religion Vital to Freedom

*James 2:12.*— "So speak ye, and so do, as men that are to be judged by a law of liberty."

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F the direct question should be put to those who are responsible for the conduct of our great universities and colleges, "What is the chief end of education?", no doubt the answer would be substantially this,— "To fit the youth of our country to meet the real needs of the place and time in which they must live their lives". Educators may and do differ widely and sharply as to what the needs of the age are, and as to the special training adapted to meet these needs; but all of them, when they would determine what direction to take in their educational policy, look for guidance to the needs and demands of the present age. You who, at this time, leave the university for the life of the community, know that you are prepared, as well as the material in you allows, to meet concrete, specific needs:—the world must have physicians and chemists, lawyers and engineers, ministers and agriculturists, and many other kinds of trained workmen; and you have been well set on your way toward meeting some of those immediate and practical needs of your place and time.

It is then quite in harmony with the main course of your education that I should raise to-day the question whether you are equipped to meet one of the most serious needs of the time and the country in which you are to live out your life. I do not hesitate to call it the greatest need of our age. While one should be slow to take any one characteristic of so vast and manysided an age as ours, and say, "This is chief", yet one may always venture to voice his own strong convictions: and I

am sure many would agree with me in the declaration that the most serious and urgent need of our time is that we find an *adequate substitute for the lost sense of authority* ; or, to view it from a different angle, the supreme need of our day is *men and women equipped to live well in a free age*.

Certainly no one will question the statement that ours is an age in which authority has lost much of its force. There are some who lament the fact, and others who rejoice : but all are compelled to admit the fact. In political life the change is so marked that it scarcely needs mention. The nineteenth century will stand out in history as the era in which established authority yielded slowly and stubbornly to advancing democracy, until its defeat was decisive, and only a few outposts were in the hands of the forces of reaction, still compact and threatening, but on their way to ultimate surrender. The mighty chorus grows from year to year of those who sing the song of the free people :

" We have knelt before kings ; we have bent before lords ;  
For theirs were the crowns, and theirs were the swords :  
But the times of the bending and bowing are past ;  
And the day of the people is dawning at last ".

Equally plain is the weakening of authority in the church. What a contrast between the position of absolute control held by the church in the Middle Ages, and the restricted and weakened authority possessed by the church to-day ! What a contrast between the Puritan church of New England in the days when the pulpit was supreme over men's conduct and the right to vote was limited to church members, and the church of to-day, which makes no attempt to impose its regulations by any force save that of reason and conscience.

Less obvious, but more serious, is the decay or lapse of authority in the realm of religious beliefs and social standards. It was a precise and well-arranged little world in which our fathers lived and moved and had their being. Customs and traditions were accepted as binding ; to revolt against them was to

defy society, a very serious thing to do in those times. It hardly occurred to any but the boldest to question the right of common ethical and social standards to command his conduct. To-day every ordinary man demands a reason for his obedience to the plainest custom or tradition. In one of Sienkiewicz's incomparable tales from Polish history, a company of captives, in charge of a simple and faithful captain, are scheming how to make their escape. Obviously the way is to win over their guard to their side. One proposes force, another reason; but the shrewdest of them, old Zagloba, finds the right means in mere assertion of authority. He informs the dazed and bewildered guard that he is his uncle, and, as such, is entitled to demand respect and obedience; then quietly and firmly he says, "It is required", and the soldier salutes and obeys. The mass of men were more or less like that soldier not so very long ago. They yielded unquestioning obedience to self-assertive authority. There is shrewd knowledge of human nature in Mr. Dooley's remark, "I'll believe anything, if ye'll only tell it to me often enough". We must believe these doctrines, and not those; we must keep the Sabbath in just this way; we must accept a quotation from the Bible as the end of all controversy; we must do thus and so, for so men have always done.

But now, for the mass of men, this has ceased to be true. The natural temper of our day is not inclined to blind submission. It asks, "Why?". It demands a reason. For authority, as such, it has small respect. It cares little or nothing for the threats and promises attached to statements of religious faith or to codes of conduct; for the reality has faded from them, and fear has gone at the same time. The hell which was so horrible and impending a reality to Dante has become a mere curious relic of ancient thought to the average man. The heaven which so powerfully allured Baxter has to many a man to-day no more reality than Aladdin's wonderful palace. Without its rewards and punishments religious authority cannot enforce its decrees.



Church councils may thunder as of old, but the average man coolly watches the storm, quite sure the lightning will not strike. Standards and judgments, once universally accepted, as to conduct and habits, as to woman's proper sphere, as to the life of the home, and a thousand other matters of intimate and serious meaning, are questioned, or lightly disregarded. It is an age of freedom ; we have done with imposed authority, once for all. If any church, any creed, any book, any social institution, however respected and sacred in the past, claims the right to command our souls, we do not bow our heads and submit without question, as did the men of the past ; we stand erect and "ask the title-deeds". Authority has been forced to abdicate, and freedom has taken its place. We shall do as we will ; and none can molest us or make us afraid.

I am sure no one will so mistake what I am saying as to think I am pointing out any real weakening of moral power in the community or any decay of essential religion, or any lapse of real authority in any sphere. On the contrary I believe that this age is eager and earnest in its moral and religious life as few eras have been. We are simply shifting from false authority to real, from the shadow to the substance, from the cloak of religion to its reality, from an external moral code to an internal moral principle, from the unstable authority of the mighty man to the irresistible authority of the public conscience. It is glorious, this modern march toward freedom and light, this refusal to obey anything but the ultimate.

But there is always danger and loss in shifting from one base to another. There is grave danger to-day that individuals and social groups shall move out from the shadow of authority simply into the shadow of freedom, not into its reality. Every true heart should welcome the change, with all its dangers and losses and crises. Better all the problems and perils of liberty, than any sort of imposed authority, for all the quiet and order it may secure. Better the mountains of Kentucky than the streets of



Moscow ; better the thousand sects of Protestantism than the Procrustean bed of the ancient church.

“ For ever in thine eyes, O Liberty,  
Shines that high light whereby the world is saved ;  
And, though thou slay us, we will trust in thee ”.

But it is vitally essential that this age of freedom shall find men and women worthy to live in it ; it is an absolute necessity that we find the moral equivalent of authority.

We are always moving out carelessly into some new experience of freedom, with shouts and hurrahs, to realize slowly that we are not ready for it or worthy of it. A stroke of the pen, an Emancipation Proclamation, made the black man free ; but fifty years have not yet solved the problem of the freedman.

There is a country to the south of us which, many years ago, in a heroic struggle, threw off the yoke of authority, and proclaimed its independence. Is Mexico the better for the absence of firm authority ? In her present chaos we see an object lesson of what happens when authority dies, and the rightful successor is not ready.

Within the lifetime of men still young, Japan has moved out from autocracy to democracy. She has thrown away old standards and ideals and beliefs, and has come into the light of modern thought and action. And now her leaders are asking how they can overcome the corrupting tendencies that are manifesting themselves, how they can regain the moral force that somehow has disappeared with the lapse of the ancient faiths and codes. China, but a year or two ago, cast out her rulers, and became a Republic. Was the problem solved ? The strong man is in control there to-day ; authority is again supreme ; for freedom is safe only when the people are fit to be free. Unless a man will govern himself, unless a race can govern itself, it must be governed. It is all well enough to shout for joy when authority lays down the sceptre and the throne is trundled off to the store-room. But unless the mass of us are worthy of self-

government and freedom, it is only a short time till the throne is back in its place again, and the strongest man is sitting on it.

You have cast off authority: you no longer find in the Bible the absolute word of God, commanding your soul; you no longer yield unquestioning submission to the social standards of the past; you "sit as God, holding no form of creed, but contemplating all". Very well; but *what have you in the place of all these?* For these had their uses. There was something your mother found in her Bible that was very precious and worth while, and that made her worth while to the community. Your father's creed carried him strongly through deep waters. The traditional code of social conduct kept many a man's life respectable, at least outwardly. The Sabbath law, which you question, made for righteousness and family integrity, and personal strength of character. What have you in their place?

I tell you, men and women of this free age, it is high time we were awakening to the serious obligations of a free age; time we were realizing that the lapse of imposed authority puts on us burdens as much heavier than those our fathers bore as the cares of a man are weightier than the burdens of a youth.

"So speak ye, and so act, as men that shall be judged by a law of liberty". There is the message we must heed. It is ignoble to confess, "I am a slave". But it is a fearful thing to stand up and say, "I am free". For instantly you subject yourself to the judgment of the hardest of all laws, the law of liberty. Philip Brooks has graphically pictured the working of that law. He imagines the great Day of Judgment; the Judge sits on his throne; and all souls are gathered before Him to meet their doom. But this is the judgment; no word of condemnation; no sentence; no fixed fate. The Judge simply raises his hand and instantly all constraint is removed from every soul; it is free to do as it will, to go where it pleases, unhampered by any external pressure, or imposed motive. And instantly, inevitably, the secrets of all hearts are exposed, and

every soul goes to its own place, judged by the law of liberty.

Not in some Final Day of Judgment only, but to-day, on earth, we are being judged by the law of liberty. Other laws have lost their force ; but that terrible, inexorable, inescapable law confronts us more sternly than ever. Do you not see that, for every atom of authority removed from us and from our world, a new greatness of character must come in the average man, a new moral responsibility, a new trustworthiness, an access of free loyalty to righteousness and truth, a new grace of self-control ; else freedom means disaster to the soul and to society.

The great, immediate, urgent needs of this free age can be met only through an abundant supply of the right sort of character, through men and women fit for freedom.

That means men and women governed by reason, not by prejudice, open-minded to old and new, to friend and foe. It means men and women self-controlled, able to govern their impulses, able to set their higher natures above the lower. He only is safe without law who does by nature the things contained in the law. What a reflection on human nature that, when we say of a man, " He is a law unto himself ", we imply that the man is reckless and harmful. Yet the lapse of external authority demands men who can be each " a law unto himself ", and society be the richer and more secure thereby. It means men and women of great loyalty, capable of large faiths and compelling enthusiasms, cheerfully and freely volunteering in the service of the very causes whose right to draft them into service they have strongly resisted. In short, if freedom is to be secure and strong, there must be many men and women who will do freely and of their own motion what authority made men do in older days.

That is what we must have, if this great day of the people, of true intellectual and spiritual and political liberty, is not to die out in another great disappointment and autocracy come stealing back to the throne again. It is the strength of autocracy that it can succeed with but a little group of its own men, or even

with a single Napoleon. It is the weakness of freedom, of spiritual authority, that it depends on *every man*. But that is also its glory. This great and wonderful promise of freedom, of democracy in the state, and spiritual reality in the church, and brotherhood in society, *cannot* be fulfilled unless *you, every man*, are the sort of man the age needs. We must have men who neither fear the future nor forget the past : men who can subordinate private advantage to public good ; men of automatic conscience, able to steer a straight moral course over an uncharted sea by the stars and the compass ; men reasonable, righteous, loyal, and self-controlled. Far above all the other many and varied needs of this strange and groping age of ours, needs painful and sharp and sore, rises this one great dominating demand for men of the right sort, characters fit to be free, who can be turned loose without running wild, to whom the slackening of external control means simply the growing joy of self-control.

And that means, does it not, that what we need is *men of God*? Lawrence Oliphant put it in a terse phrase when he said that the great need of the time is for "spiritually minded men of the world". Friends, I stand here to-day, in the name of God and of the wonderful modern world in which He has placed us, to remind you and myself, that the supreme need of our time is *religion*. For, amid all man's wonderful discoveries and inventions, he has never found but one force that could transform or strengthen character, that could lay hold of a man in the secret places of his spirit, and make him what he ought to be. And that force is the life of God in the soul of man. Back in the ages of authority, when a few strong men decided the course of the world's life, the mass of men might do without religion, or with but a perfunctory and delegated sort. It was sufficient to pray, "Give the king Thy judgments, O God ; and Thy righteousness unto the king's son." But a new prayer is needed to-day : "Give the people thy judgments, O God ; and Thy righteous-

ness unto all the children of the people." For, when the outcome and conduct of the common life rest upon the self-determined action of every man, every man must somehow find God really for himself, that into his soul may come the refreshing grace of the living water of the spirit. I declare that until you so find Him for yourself you are not fit to live in an age of freedom. The moral demands of such a time as this drive us back to God.

This is the plea I would make, the call I would voice, to the young men and young women of our country, that you shall take your place quietly but aggressively, definitely, positively, among the religious forces of the community in which you are to live. And I mean the organized religious forces, the church and its allies. If any of you object that the church still lingers in the shadows of the dead past, still calls for submission to authority, still holds up a Bible and a creed to which you must blindly submit, or stay outside, I make three blunt answers: The first is that you do not know the church of to-day; it is moving on, slowly perhaps, but really and gladly, into the new light of freedom, where the only authority is that of the spirit; it welcomes into its fellowship and work all who love God and want to do His will on earth. The second answer is that, in so far as the church is lagging behind, and failing to be the moral and spiritual leader which the times demand, the very condition is a call for your service. There is nothing more needed than that the young men and women who are alive to the needs and problems of to-day shall become a vital part of the life of the church. And the third answer is that, if some of you still find yourselves aloof from the religious life of the community as organized in the church, that fact need not shut you off from God. Find God for yourself, win for and in your own soul the secret of poise and self-control which comes only through His presence. In and through the church if you can, out of the church if you must, see to it that your life helps supply the deep, vital need of the

present age, the need of pervasive, controlling faith in the living God. The great realities of the religious life still stand ; rather let us say, they move on steadily with the advance of humanity. It may easily seem to many an honest and earnest youth to-day that, as the shell of imposed belief and custom which protected his immaturity has crumbled and dissolved, somehow the Bible and Christ and the church have gone with the beliefs and habits of mind through which they first came to him. Look again at the Bible, and you find it offering itself simply and wonderfully as an inspiring record of how men found God and found strength and joy in Him, a text book of the life of the Spirit. Look again at the church, come close to its life, and you will wonder and rejoice at the fresh vigor that beats and works in the old body ; you find the church more and more turning its energies into real service of the souls and bodies, the social groups and communities of men. Come closer to Christ ; know Him for yourself ; scales will fall from your eyes ; you will see in Him the Leader of that very advance of freedom and democracy and brotherhood in which your soul rejoices. What the world needs to-day is that the men and women of goodwill, who want to be honest, and true, and real, and helpful, who have turned their backs on tradition and external authority ; and who sadly conclude that they have left behind them somewhere in the shadows of discarded thoughts the Bible and the church and the Christ their fathers and mothers loved, should lift their eyes and see the Bible lying open, with a new light on its pages for this new day of spiritual freedom ; the church sensitive to the new needs of to-day and eager for modern leadership and service ; Christ " going on before ", " with the cross that turns not back ", now, as ever, the leader of men who want to be free and real.

Members of the graduating class, this word which I bring to you is not merely a text from the Bible ; it is the appeal of the world that is waiting for you, the call of the age in which you are to live out your life ; it is the word of the Living God to



your souls: "So speak ye, and so do, as men that are to be judged by a law of liberty". Can you stand that test? Is your spirit, your self-control, your loyalty, your steadfastness, as much deeper and stronger than that of your fathers and mothers, as the demands of this free age are more stringent than the demands of their day? It is a solemn privilege and joy to move up out of childhood into maturity. But it is a fearful thing to come to the years of maturity without coming to manhood.

Whatever else you may be or fail to be, I beseech you do not fail to be men and women of God. That is what the world of to-day, your world, needs most. "There was a man sent from God whose name was John". In those few simple words is summed up a great movement in religious history. In similar words might be summed up all significant movements and achievements. The whole of Christianity may be put in a sentence: "There was a man sent from God whose name was Jesus". Whatever form your life in the world may take, whatever the kind of service you may render, let God send you into it, as He sent Jesus; and you can stand and move and work there, in constant touch with the Spirit Who alone can give strength and serenity and joy, saying with gladness, as Jesus said it, "My Father worketh even until now, and I work."

"A creed is a rod,  
And a crown is of night;  
But this thing is God  
To be man with thy might;  
To grow straight in the strength of thy spirit,  
And live out thy life as the light."

You are going out into a world to which God is entrusting, as He has not to any previous age, the glorious but terrible responsibility of freedom, a world from which, rapidly, one by one, the external constraints are being removed which, in past days, while they hampered, yet served to keep individuals and society within bounds. May you be fit leaders of such an age, through



the grace of God which is in Christ Jesus, through that self-control, that God-control, which makes external constraint needless. "If therefore the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed". So may you, as free companions and servants of the Christian God, help to bring the day when "the creation itself shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption, into the glorious liberty of the sons of God." AMEN.

A limited number of copies of the foregoing address may be secured on application to the Secretary of Cornell University, Ithaca, N. Y.